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JUN 02 1999

Saturday, May 29, 1999

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Mill cleans up old chemical site

Traces of mercury found in 1950s construction debris

BERLIN - An undetermined amount of mercury has been found on Crown Vantage's property, but it poses no threat to the public. The company is taking steps, with the help of the NH Department of Environmental Services (DES) and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), to clean up the problem.

Ray Danforth, who heads environmental operations for the local mills, said the mercury was discovered a few weeks ago

while mill officials checked potential environmental problems as a condition of the pending sale of the mills to American Tissue Corp. The mercury was found in a four acre construction and demolition debris landfill on mill property located off Hutchins Street, on the East Side of the river, across from Northern Forest Heritage Park. The site is fenced in, and is inaccessible to the public either from land or the Androscoggin River.

The mercury came from an old chemical building, demolished many years ago, that was at the location, Danforth explained. From roughly the 1920s to the mid-1950s, chlorine and caustic soda were made at the building. Mercury-filled electrodes were part of that process, and over the years, some apparently were spilled or lost, Danforth said.

Soon after finding traces of the liquid element, Crown Vantage contacted DES.

Robert Varney, commissioner of that agency, said chemicals are a very common problem in old factory sites in New Hampshire and other parts of the country.

"It's a common situation at older mills, and we often find chemicals at older industrial sites, especially dry cleaners and older shopping centers," Varney said. "Crown Vantage has been extremely cooperative

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from day one. They've been moving ahead expeditiously on every front and in some cases before we asked. The level of cooperation has been outstanding."

At the present time, a strategy is being developed for handling the mercury, which Varney said does not appear to have leached into the river or groundwater. The nearest home is roughly 1,000 feet away.

"We're exploring the site carefully. The company has done many soil borings down to bedrock over its four acres. There are some spots where the levels are some-

what high. In other places, [the levels] are very low to almost nonexistent," Varney said.

While emphasizing that the mercury poses no immediate threat to the public, Varney added that river sediments are being checked as well to make sure the contamination did not spread - a situation he believes is highly unlikely.

"Mercury doesn't percolate through the groundwater. It tends to stay together. It's not like benzene, which can migrate from a gas station to a private underground well,"

Varney said.

While the final remediation of the site, which also contains a small amount of lead, has not yet been determined, Varney said it probably would be done as a small landfill closure.

"Essentially, it could be encapsulated, made high and dry so there is no surface water runoff and the contaminants can't migrate," Varney said.

The Federal Environmental Protection Agency is fully aware of the situation, but only has been involved in a supportive role

in the cleanup effort, Varney said, proudly noting that New Hampshire has one of the best hazardous waste cleanup programs in the nation.

Danforth, who added that Crown Vantage also is cleaning up two much smaller sites where there have been minor oil spills, said the discovery of the mercury will have no effect on the sale of the mills.

"We'll keep working on it after the mill changes hands. My guess is that we'll be done with it by September or October," Danforth said.